

Michael Powell's push to loosen or eliminate rules governing media ownership should be subjected to far greater scrutiny, because there is much evidence to suggest that his justifications for further deregulation are unsound.

Mr. Powell claims that deregulation of the industry will "break the 'stranglehold' on the marketplace" by facilitating competition. Yet since the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, there has been an unprecedented reconstitution of media ownership into the hands of four or five large corporations that now control 90% of the market. This seems damning evidence that deregulation thwarts, rather than encourages, competition.

He also points out that changes need to occur to keep pace with a changing industry. But this is a specious argument. The six rules currently under scrutiny are designed to prevent the development of monopolistic influence, and this goal has nothing to do the number or type of venues we now have for the dissemination of news.

Finally, Mr. Powell claims that the public will benefit from deregulation. One benefit, however, is unlikely to be better journalism. A comprehensive five-year study undertaken by The Project for Excellence in Journalism concludes that there are "serious questions about regulatory changes that lead to the concentration of vast numbers of TV stations in the hands of a very few large corporations." Their findings show that this trend "may prove the most profitable" but "is likely to lead to further erosion in the content and public interest value of the local TV news Americans receive."

With the big media owners lobbying hard for deregulation, one really does suspect that corporate profit is the bottom line here. But the FCC's purpose is not to facilitate the profit-making capacity of large media conglomerates. It is to ensure that the First Amendment rights of the viewing public are protected.